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ON PAGE 1A

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The Army says Ralph Sigler committed suicide, carrying the truth about his spying to the grave; his wife and father think the Army murdered him

Double Agent Trail Leads Into Shadows

By Larry Jolidon
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EL PASO, Tex. — Ralph Sigler of El Paso was a secret agent for U.S. Army intelligence, but the Army says he took his biggest secrets to the grave.

They say they may never know what he told the Russians that he wasn't supposed to or how he was compromised.

But Sigler's widow, Ilse, thinks the Army is the one with all the secrets, and she has hired investigators and attorneys to help her find out exactly how Chief Warrant Officer Sigler, soldier, husband, father and spy with 14 Russian scalps on his cloak, came to die by electrocution.

Ralph Sigler lived in a world of shadows and shades of meaning, but the shadow of his death nearly four years ago may be the longest of all.

It was April 13, 1976, when Sigler, a career Army man who for 10 years had been an undercover agent, was found dead in a motel room near Fort Meade, Md.

The bespectacled, serious-looking son of a Czechoslovakian immigrant was found face down on the floor at the foot of a crudely fashioned executioner's perch: a straight-backed desk chair stacked on top of a fake leather arm chair. Sigler's belt was draped over the back of the top chair.

Electric cords removed from two table lamps, spliced and free of insulation where they were wrapped around his upper arms, were still plugged into a wall socket that could be turned off and on at the shoulder-high wall light switch.

He had a bruised, bloody face, chipped teeth, burns on his arms and fingers, and a gut full of booze, three times the amount medical authorities estimate it would take to make a 5-foot-6-inch-tall, 150-pound man like Sigler staggering drunk.

On his left forearm was a jungle-cat tattoo, a mute link to the 20 years of barracks life he led before becoming a spy in 1966. Crushed in his right hand was a plastic drinking cup that presumably had contained the water that, when poured on the contact points, brought the juice sizzling into his body when the switch was tripped.

The door to his third-floor room had been locked with a deadbolt from inside, and the only window in the room also was locked from the inside.

The Army ruled it a clear-cut case of suicide, brought on by Sigler's realization that he had been caught trying to deceive his government. As a double agent, he was supposed to sell false or worthless information to the Soviet Union while at the same time keeping the Russians convinced he was actually their spy.

He had performed meritorious service, rooting out 14 Soviet espionage agents, and was on his way to a 15th score, his supervisors say.

But a few months before his death, the Army's polygraph tests had shown "major areas of deception" in his answers and, under intensive questioning, Sigler either wouldn't or couldn't say why he registered guilty responses.

Maryland State Police, whose troopers also investigated, agreed it was a suicide. Cpl. Roger Cassell, who directed the police investigation, says no fingerprints were taken at the scene, however, because the Army's explanation of suicide was accepted as fact.

The clincher appeared to be a note that the intelligence agent who discovered Sigler's body said he found in the room. The agent, Louis Martel, said he found it and stuffed it in his pocket after the desk clerk had returned to the motel lobby to call an ambulance, but later turned it over to the state police.

The writing was in Sigler's scrawl. It read:

"1. I don't know what I'm guilty of.

2. Then why the positive responses?

3. Acting?

4. Lying?

5. Don't know the difference?

6. Too bad!

I've given up all hope. I wish I knew, I wish I knew. I tried too hard. I'm dead."

But Sigler's family remains unconvinced by the Army's explanation. "My son was murdered," says his father, Alex Sigler, his speech still thick with the accent of eastern Europe. He talks of how proud he is of his son, who decided to "do the 30 years" in the Army, and of how he changed the spelling of the family name from "Ciglar" when he brought Ralph and his daughter Anna to the United States after World War I.

Sigler's widow is naturally reluctant to believe her husband could have betrayed the country he served so long and honorably. On top of that there are the telephone calls . . . and the letter.

On the afternoon of the day Sigler died, he called their daughter, Karin, at their home in El Paso. Karin remembers thinking how unusual it was for her father to sound so upset and to begin asking about her "plans for the future." As he did, the line went dead.

She called her mother, then a sales clerk at an El Paso furniture store, and told her she was concerned about her father.

Not long afterward, Sigler called his wife at work. She said it was hard to hear him over the noise in the background, "a scratching, electronic kind of noise, very loud."

Sigler told his wife: "Just listen to me. Get a respectable lawyer. Sue the Army. I'm dying. I never lied." Then silence.

Ilse Sigler didn't know where her husband was calling from, but she assumed he was being hurt and probably being held against his will. She managed to arouse official concern by calling her husband's superiors at the missile complex associated with Fort Bliss, Sigler's permanent-duty station and the location of his "cover" job, as an electronics technician.

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Eventually, Carlos Zapata, a fellow military intelligence officer at Fort Bliss, called Ilse Sigler and gave her the telephone number at the Holiday Inn near Fort Meade where her husband was staying.

The phone in his room did not answer, and the desk clerk refused to heed her plea to go see if the room was vacant.

But Army intelligence agents at Fort Meade who had been interrogating Sigler for more than a week in an attempt to fill in the "areas of deception" that had shown up on his lie detector results say they were closing in on "Landward Ho," their breezy code name for secret agent Sigler.

Agents Martel and Donnell Drake were dispatched to the motel. They checked the bar and then talked the desk clerk into letting them into the room to check on a "friend" they described as having a drinking problem, a bad heart and a worried wife.

The desk clerk, using a special key to slide back the deadbolt lock, let himself and Martel into the room. The agent kicked the electric cord out of the socket with his foot and sent the desk clerk downstairs to call an ambulance. Using the room phone, he called his superiors at Fort Meade. "Landward Ho" had been found.

Ilse Sigler and Karin, who knew nothing of her father's undercover activities until the day of his death, were visited the next morning by Army officers and a chaplain from Fort Bliss, informing them of his apparent suicide and what his survivors' benefits would amount to.

Ilse Sigler says that when they started referring to her husband's having "mental problems and a drinking problem," she kicked them out. Sigler's military medical records, discovered under the floor mat of his car a few weeks later by his daughter, indicated no previous problems related to drinking or mental health.

The letter Sigler had mailed three days before his death didn't arrive until a few days afterward, but to Ilse Sigler the message was indelible:

"Dear Ilse: Should anything happen to me, suicide, death, or accident, sue the U.S. Army for being the cause, naming specifically the following as defendants." CWO Sigler's list included two major generals in charge of intelligence at Fort Meade, his principal contacts there; Zapata and John Schaffstahl, another military agent Sigler had worked for at Fort Bliss; and Francis Pracek, his FBI liaison in El Paso.

The letter also instructed her to demand the return of the notes and papers the Army had talked him into releasing during his questioning in Maryland.

Although Army officials admit they took Sigler out for a day of drinking earlier in his stay in hopes of loosening his tongue about his "deception," they deny that they provided him any drinks or even had contact with him after the final lie-detector session.

The polygraph operator said Sigler asked him to "buy him a six-pack" of beer as he left, but that he told Sigler he didn't have time.

The bartender and waitresses at the motel bar say they didn't see Sigler anytime that afternoon or evening. Bartenders at saloons near the hotel say he wasn't one of their customers that night either, and the Army says he did not rent a car during his entire nine-day stay, even though he routinely did so when sent out of town. The room where his body was found contained no evidence that alcohol had been consumed there.

When did he last have contact with the military?

The Army's official investigation report claims polygraph operator Odell King was the last to see him alive, at 2:30 p.m., as he left Sigler's motel room.

Yet the same report goes on to say that some unnamed persons "discussed" the bad test results with Sigler sometime afterward and that he could still not explain why his answers were evasive. Only then did the intelligence agents at Fort Meade decide he should be taken there the next day.

In another apparent contradiction, the state police report says Noel Jones, the intelligence specialist in charge of Sigler's visit, told the state troopers that "the victim had last been seen alive at Fort Meade on 4/13/76 at 1500 hours (3 p.m.) when he had completed a routine polygraph examinaton conducted by the Army."

Who, if anybody, was with him from that afternoon on?

According to the statements of the two intelligence agents sent to the motel to look for Sigler in response to his wife's panicky calls, the one who hadn't seen him in several years and thus was the least likely to recognize him was sent to the bar to look for him. When he returned to the car without Sigler, the other agent, who had been with Sigler almost daily since his arrival, went to the desk clerk to ask to check the room.

Harry Thompson, a Maryland private investigator hired by Ilse Sigler, said that while Sigler's room was apparently locked from the inside in such a way that a key the desk clerk controlled was needed to admit a visitor, there would have been ample opportunity for someone hiding in the bathroom or elsewhere to come out of hiding after the desk clerk left Martel in the room to go downstairs and phone for an ambulance.

Even the Army's official autopsy, which was done as part of the official investigation of Sigler's death, stops short of drawing a conclusion on whether Sigler's death was indeed a suicide.

Dr. Robert W. Hertzog, the Army pathologist at Walter Reed Hospital who performed the autopsy, explained why he concluded that the "cause" of death was electrocution but left open the question of "the manner of death."

"The man was quite intoxicated," said Dr. Hertzog. "I cannot exclude the possibility that he was set up . . . that someone rigged him up."

He also noted, as Thompson and others have, that Sigler's body was found facing away from the doorway. But the stacked chairs in which he supposedly sat while he flipped the light switch on with his elbow were still facing the door.

Hertzog said that if he had been dealing with "ordinary circumstances," he would have added his opinion that Sigler's death was a suicide.

"But I knew that we were involved here with intelligence people, we were dealing with people who know about locks, about getting in and out of locked rooms."

When investigator Thompson recalls the photos of Sigler's motel room and the gaps in the police and military investigations, he can conjure up a very ugly set of possibilities.

What if, says Thompson, the electric wires and the stacked chairs were actually the setting for an interrogation session, where the light switch was flipped on and off, sending jolts of current into Sigler to make him talk about things even a wildly drunken man couldn't or wouldn't talk about?

And what if the questions continued, but the answers still didn't come, and "they gave him a little too much juice" and he died right there at the feet of his questioners?

And when you think you have all of that figured out, says Thompson, you can begin trying to figure out whether the questioners were U.S. Army intelligence agents or KGB operatives or third parties from Mexico City, San Francisco or somewhere else in the world of spies and counterspies, of double agents and doubled double agents, the world of sold secrets and worthless secrets.

and when you get that far, you're beginning to live in the world where Ralph Sigler, a patriot until the end or at least very nearly the end, lived — and died.